

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF NEW YORK

ANTONIO MOLINA PEREZ,

Plaintiff,

-against-

WILLIAM L. DEPROSPO, et al.,

Defendants.

22-CV-2866 (LTS)

ORDER OF DISMISSAL

LAURA TAYLOR SWAIN, Chief United States District Judge:

Plaintiff, who is currently detained at the Orange County Jail, brings this *pro se* action challenging his ongoing state court criminal proceedings in Orange County, New York. He names as Defendants (1) Orange County Court Judge William L. DeProspro, who is presiding over Plaintiff's criminal case; (2) Natasha Turner, Plaintiff's criminal defense lawyer; and (3) Orange County District Attorney ("DA") David M. Hoovler. By order dated May 11, 2022, the Court granted Plaintiff's request to proceed *in forma pauperis* (IFP), that is, without prepayment of fees.¹ For the reasons set forth below, the Court dismisses the action.

STANDARD OF REVIEW

The Prison Litigation Reform Act requires that federal courts screen complaints brought by prisoners who seek relief against a governmental entity or an officer or employee of a governmental entity. See 28 U.S.C. § 1915A(a). The Court must dismiss a prisoner's IFP complaint, or any portion of the complaint, that is frivolous or malicious, fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, or seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief. 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2)(B), 1915A(b); *see Abbas v. Dixon*, 480 F.3d 636, 639

¹ Prisoners are not exempt from paying the full filing fee even when they have been granted permission to proceed IFP. *See* 28 U.S.C. § 1915(b)(1).

(2d Cir. 2007). The Court must also dismiss a complaint if the court lacks subject matter jurisdiction. *See* Fed. R. Civ. P. 12(h)(3).

BACKGROUND

This action concerns Plaintiff's ongoing criminal proceedings in the Orange County Supreme Court. In the complaint, he does not allege facts in support of any claims brought against the Defendants, who are the presiding judge, prosecuting attorney, and criminal defense lawyer in his pending criminal case. He instead attaches documents from that case and refers the Court to those documents as evidence of Defendants' alleged violations of his rights. For relief, he states, "I would like this case to be dismissed due to ineffective assistance of counsel." (ECF 2, at 5.) He also seeks money damages.

After Plaintiff filed his complaint, he submitted to the court five letters, all of which concern his criminal proceedings and complaints about his lawyer.

DISCUSSION

A. *Younger* Abstention

Plaintiff's request that this Court intervene in his pending state court criminal proceeding, and "dismiss[]" the case is denied under the doctrine established by *Younger v. Harris*, 401 U.S. 37 (1971), the United States Supreme Court decision holding that a federal court may not enjoin a pending state court criminal proceeding in the absence of special circumstances suggesting bad faith, harassment, or irreparable injury that is both serious and immediate. *See Gibson v. Berryhill*, 411 U.S. 564, 573-74 (1973) (citing *Younger*, 401 U.S. 37); *see also Sprint Commc'ns, Inc. v. Jacobs*, 134 S. Ct. 584, 588 (2013) ("*Younger* exemplifies one class of cases in which federal-court abstention is required: When there is a parallel, pending state criminal proceeding, federal courts must refrain from enjoining the state prosecution.").

Plaintiff has alleged no facts suggesting bad faith, harassment, or irreparable injury with respect to his pending state court criminal proceeding. The Court therefore abstains from intervening in that proceeding and dismisses those claims for injunctive relief.

B. 42 U.S.C. § 1983

Because Plaintiff brings this action against two defendants who are employed by the State of New York – Judge DeProspo and DA Hoovler – the Court construes the complaint as asserting claims under 42 U.S.C. § 1983. To state a claim under Section 1983, a plaintiff must allege both that: (1) a right secured by the Constitution or laws of the United States was violated, and (2) the right was violated by a person acting under the color of state law, or a “state actor.” *West v. Atkins*, 487 U.S. 42, 48-49 (1988).

Plaintiff’s claims against DeProspo and Hoovler are barred under judicial and prosecutorial immunity, respectfully. Plaintiff’s fails to state a Section 1983 claim against Turner, his criminal defense lawyer, because she is not a state actor.

1. Judicial Immunity

Judges are absolutely immune from suit for damages for any actions taken within the scope of their judicial responsibilities. *Mireles v. Waco*, 502 U.S. 9, 11 (1991). Generally, “acts arising out of, or related to, individual cases before the judge are considered judicial in nature.” *Bliven v. Hunt*, 579 F.3d 204, 210 (2d Cir. 2009). “Even allegations of bad faith or malice cannot overcome judicial immunity.” *Id.* (citations omitted). This is because, “[w]ithout insulation from liability, judges would be subject to harassment and intimidation . . .” *Young v. Selsky*, 41 F.3d 47, 51 (2d Cir. 1994). In addition, Section 1983, as amended in 1996, provides that “in any action brought against a judicial officer for an act or omission taken in such officer’s judicial capacity, injunctive relief shall not be granted unless a declaratory decree was violated or declaratory relief was unavailable.” 42 U.S.C. § 1983.

Judicial immunity does not apply when the judge takes action “outside” his judicial capacity, or when the judge takes action that, although judicial in nature, is taken “in absence of jurisdiction.” *Mireles*, 502 U.S. at 9-10; *see also Bliven*, 579 F.3d at 209-10 (describing actions that are judicial in nature). But “the scope of [a] judge’s jurisdiction must be construed broadly where the issue is the immunity of the judge.” *Stump v. Sparkman*, 435 U.S. 349, 356 (1978).

Plaintiff fails to allege any facts showing that Judge DeProspo acted beyond the scope of his judicial responsibilities or outside his jurisdiction. *See Mireles*, 509 U.S. at 11-12. Because Plaintiff sues Judge DeProspo for “acts arising out of, or related to, individual cases before him,” the judge is immune from suit for such claims. *Bliven*, 579 F.3d at 210.

The Court therefore dismisses Plaintiff’s claims against Judge DeProspo because they seek monetary relief against a defendant who is immune from such relief, 28 U.S.C.

§ 1915(e)(2)(B)(iii), and, consequently, as frivolous, 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(i). *See Mills v. Fischer*, 645 F.3d 176, 177 (2d Cir. 2011) (“Any claim dismissed on the ground of absolute judicial immunity is ‘frivolous’ for purposes of [the in forma pauperis statute].”).

2. Prosecutorial Immunity

Prosecutors are immune from civil suits for damages for acts committed within the scope of their official duties where the challenged activities are not investigative in nature but, rather, are “‘intimately associated with the judicial phase of the criminal process.’” *Giraldo v. Kessler*, 694 F.3d 161, 165 (2d Cir. 2012) (quoting *Imbler v. Pachtman*, 424 U.S. 409, 430 (1976)); *see also Buckley v. Fitzsimmons*, 509 U.S. 259, 269 (1993) (absolute immunity is analyzed under a “functional approach” that “looks to the nature of the function performed, not the identity of the actor who performed it” (internal quotation marks and citations omitted)). In addition, prosecutors are absolutely immune from suit for acts that may be administrative obligations but are “directly connected with the conduct of a trial.” *Van de Kamp v. Goldstein*, 555 U.S. 335,

344 (2009); *see also* *Ogunkoya v. Monaghan*, 913 F.3d 64, 70-72 (2d Cir. 2019) (holding that ADAs’ direction as to where criminal defendant would be arraigned was in preparation for a court proceeding in which the prosecutors were acting as advocates, and ADAs were therefore shielded by absolute immunity (citing, *inter alia*, *Van de Kamp*)).

Here, Plaintiff’s claims against DA Hoovler are based on actions within the scope of Hoovler’s official duties and associated with the conduct of a trial. Therefore, these claims are dismissed because they seek monetary relief against a defendant who is immune from suit, 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(b)(iii), and, consequently, as frivolous, 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(i). *See Collazo v. Pagano*, 656 F. 3d 131, 134 (2d Cir. 2011) (holding that claim against prosecutor is frivolous if it arises from conduct that is “intimately associated with the judicial phase of the criminal process”).

3. Private Actor

A claim for relief under Section 1983 must allege facts showing that each defendant acted under the color of a state “statute, ordinance, regulation, custom or usage.” 42 U.S.C. § 1983. Private parties therefore generally are not liable under the statute. *Sykes v. Bank of America*, 723 F.3d 399, 406 (2d Cir. 2013) (citing *Brentwood Acad. v. Tenn. Secondary Sch. Athletic Ass’n*, 531 U.S. 288, 295 (2001)); *see also* *Ciambriello v. Cnty. of Nassau*, 292 F.3d 307, 323 (2d Cir. 2002) (“[T]he United States Constitution regulates only the Government, not private parties.”).

Absent special circumstances suggesting concerted action between an attorney and a state representative, *see Nicholas v. Goord*, 430 F.3d 652, 656 n.7 (2d Cir. 2005) (citing *Adickes v. S.H. Kress & Co.*, 398 U.S. 144, 152 (1970)), the representation of a defendant by private counsel in state criminal proceedings does not constitute the degree of state involvement or interference necessary to establish a claim under Section 1983, regardless of whether that attorney is privately retained, court-appointed, or employed as a public defender. *See Bourdon v.*

Loughren, 386 F.3d 88, 90 (2d Cir. 2004) (citing *Polk Cnty. v. Dodson*, 454 U.S. 312, 324-25 (1981)); *see also Schnabel v. Abramson*, 232 F.3d 83, 87 (2d Cir. 2000) (holding that legal aid organization ordinarily is not a state actor for purposes of § 1983).

As Natasha Turner is a private party who is not alleged to work for any state or other government body, Plaintiff has not stated a claim against her under Section 1983. The Court therefore dismisses all claims against her for failure to state a claim. *See* 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii).

C. Deny Leave to Replead

District courts generally grant a *pro se* plaintiff an opportunity to amend a complaint to cure its defects, but leave to amend is not required where it would be futile. *See Hill v. Curcione*, 657 F.3d 116, 123–24 (2d Cir. 2011); *Salahuddin v. Cuomo*, 861 F.2d 40, 42 (2d Cir. 1988). Because the defects in Plaintiff’s complaint cannot be cured with an amendment, the Court declines to grant Plaintiff leave to amend his complaint.

CONCLUSION

The Court dismisses Plaintiff’s complaint, filed *in forma pauperis* under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a)(1). The claims against Judge DeProspo and DA Hoover are dismissed because they seek relief against defendants who are immune from such relief, 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(iii), and, consequently, as frivolous, 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(i). *See Mills*, 645 F.3d at 177; *Collazo*, 656 F. 3d at 134. The claims against Turner are dismissed for failure to state a claim. *See* 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii).

The Court abstains from intervening in Plaintiff’s ongoing state court criminal proceedings and denies Plaintiff’s request for injunctive relief. *See Younger*, 401 U.S. 37.

The Court certifies under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a)(3) that any appeal from this order would not be taken in good faith, and therefore IFP status is denied for the purpose of an appeal. *See Coppedge v. United States*, 369 U.S. 438, 444-45 (1962).

SO ORDERED.

Dated: May 31, 2022
New York, New York

/s/ Laura Taylor Swain

LAURA TAYLOR SWAIN
Chief United States District Judge